

1 Cor. 13:1-3

Epiphany 4 2016C

Luke 4:21-30

First Central UCC, Omaha

### "The Power of Water"

First of all, I'd like to thank Scott and you for the gracious invitation to preach this morning. I joined First Central in the early 70's and I was ordained here in 1993. It was my delight to baptize Colin here a few years ago and now Imogene, so First Central is an important piece of who I am. It's nice to be home. So the irony of this morning's passage in which the hometown folks try to throw Jesus off a cliff after they hear him preach, has not escaped me.

So what's **that** about? This passage is illustrative of my frustration with the way the lections, instead of being a continuous narrative, give us a tidbit yanked out of its place within the larger story. So if you have a wee bit of trouble following along, it's not you, it's the lesson.

It begins, "*Then* he began to say to them . . ." Then . . . When? This is early in Luke; it follows Jesus' 40 days of temptations in the wilderness during which he sorts out what his ministry and mission are to be about (that's a story we usually hear sometime during Lent). So Jesus, newly all full of the Holy Spirit, goes to his hometown of Nazareth. Of course he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, and he was invited to read from the scroll of Isaiah—the part about bringing good news to the poor, and the captives, the

blind, the sick, the oppressed . . . So far so good. And that's the point at which we begin to engage this morning's lesson. Like any good preacher, Jesus decides to give the folks a couple of examples—illustrations—of what the text in the scroll means. Each of his two examples tells about God bestowing grace on an outsider. In the first, everybody is starving, but Elisha's miracle of wheat and oil is not for the Jews, but for the widow in Sidon. (1 Kings 17.8 ff)

But wait! There's more! Then he tells the folks in Nazareth about a remarkable healing of a leper named Naaman, not in Israel, but in Syria. And the folks get mad—really mad—enraged enough to chase him out of town to some sort of cliff. There are two ways to stone somebody. One is to throw stones at the person; the other is to hurl the person toward the stones. This is apparently what they have in mind. Jesus managed to get away, but coming early in Luke as it does, this episode seems to prepare us for what to expect from Jesus. If we want a glimpse of who Jesus is, this is as good as any.

At this point, John the Baptist is still active, and he sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask that poignant question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:18-19) Jesus tells them, "Tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor

have good news brought to them." (4:22) We note that what is good news to the poor may not be such good news to the rich. Now we know what the focus of Jesus' ministry will be and what his church and we are called to be and do. Jesus is the embodiment of God's love—truly "God with us".

So the church is to be about acting out God's love in the world. Paul tells us what THAT love looks like. This part of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is poetry familiar even to those who only are in church for weddings. In 20 plus years of ministry, I think I've done one or maybe two weddings that did NOT include this passage, and one of those was for Hindus. We love this passage about all the attributes of love. So it's easy to forget that Paul's not writing about romantic love, but rebuking a congregation engaged in a good, old-fashioned church fight.

The word he uses for love in the Greek is not *philia* or *eros*, it's *agape*. This is the word for self-giving, sacrificial love. It's the love that is concerned with the welfare of the other. It's not about warm cuddles and wanting to be with the beloved, but rather about the hard work of being kind and just to people we may not even like. It's about seeing that every person is treated kindly, justly, fairly. This is the kind of love that is the foundation of Jesus' ministry to the last, the lost, and the least. We could replace the word *love* in this passage with the word *justice*, and the meaning would not be diminished.

*Justice is patient; justice is kind; justice is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. Justice is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. (1 Cor. 13:4-6)* This kind of love is not about following one's own bliss, but about the upbuilding of the church, the community, the world.

Matt and Becky, you just made some remarkable promises on behalf of your daughter. You are to resist oppression and evil, show love and justice, and witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ. (These are actually the same vows that Imogene will take as a confirmand. They are the same that folks take when joining the church as new members or at ordination.) You are to be for her, living examples of what God's love—agape love—looks like. (And if you want to show her what romantic love looks like too, well, that's okay.)

This is the part where you can rewind to your wedding service and read Paul's letter to the Corinthians, now in the context of caring about those beyond our own households. This love of the ones whom we consider to be "outsiders" is no easy thing. My Facebook newsfeed is filled with reports of the reactions to concerns about immigrants to our country: "Send them back to where they came from; build a wall; build a higher wall; don't let any more in!" I find the outcry against letting Syrians fleeing the terror of the Assad regime into our country deeply troubling—and entirely consistent with the

reaction of the folks in Nazareth when Jesus started talking about the God's providing food for the widow in Sidon and the healing of Naaman the Syrian. The pictures I see show faces filled with rage and fear.

I have learned that you are considering sponsoring a refugee family; if you're not quite sure if this is a good idea, perhaps this morning's lessons will shed a little light on the question. To help people we have not met and with whom we may have little in common except our humanity seems to me a profound expression of the kind of agape love Paul writes about. If we as a church cannot love—and by that I'm suggesting that as God's hands and feet in the world, working for justice—then we are just traffic noise and so many ring tones. You as a congregation have promised to help Matt and Becky in their task of rearing their children to risk loving the people whom God loves, which is a very good thing because there's no way they can do that on their own. It is not easy; they will need the help of their families and their church.

The Rev. Dr. Will Willamon tells a story from his days as a professor and Dean of the Chapel at Duke Divinity School at Duke University. He received a call from the father of a student in one of his classes; she was a bright, engaged student, so he rather looked forward to the appointment with her father. But the dad who entered his office was upset and nearly

purple with anger he was just barely able to contain. "What's the problem?" Willamon asked.

Four years of tuition at a top-tier school. Dean's list. She told us she wanted to go to law school and we were so pleased. Now she says she's going to be a missionary. She's going to throw away all this to go work with a bunch of people who don't even speak English. What did you teach her in that theology class, anyway?

"I see. Does your family have a church?" The father was taken aback. Why, yes, they did. "Did you have your daughter baptized?" Yes. "Was she in youth group? Was she confirmed?" Well, yes. So you've heard the words about following in the way of our Savior, showing love and justice, and furthering Christ's mission in all the world. Yes, they'd heard all the words. The dad leaned across the desk and locked eyes with Willamon. "But we didn't think she'd take it all SERIOUSLY."

So with the help of this dear congregation, we will splash water on this child, bestowing on her incredible power and surrounding her with God's grace. We will recruit Sunday School teachers, we will have Children's Moments in worship. We will have a youth group and confirmation classes, and we will send our kids to Kamp Kaleo. We will do our best to teach them about God's love. And then we will hold our breath. Amen.